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ABSTRACT

A reaccreditation self-study project was conducted at St. Jerome Catholic School in Ft. Lauderdale (Florida). The school's 325 students come from a predominantly blue collar, ethnically and racially diverse community. The curriculum provides a solid academic background of core subjects, special subjects, and extracurricular activities. The project was developed collaboratively by a school principal and a consultant in order to facilitate the use of the self-study as a tool for curriculum improvement. A detailed chronology describes the content and structure of teacher workshops held prior to and during the project. A preliminary evaluation revealed that teachers agreed the workshops provided new knowledge, reaffirmed their existing knowledge base, and gave them opportunities to discuss the practice and application of knowledge. Through the workshops and other methods of collegial support teachers were able to share their knowledge, problems, and new ideas with their colleagues. They also found their students' learning to be more interactive as a result of application of practices learned in the workshops. Finally, several characteristics that promoted the use of the reaccreditation self-study as a tool for curriculum improvement are identified: a systemic view of the process, incorporating effective staff development techniques into the workshops, and a school culture that supports innovation. (Contains 16 references.) (ND)

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A Tool for Curricula Improvement

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Abstract

This paper is a report on a reaccreditation self-study project. The project was collaboratively developed by a school principal and consultant in order to facilitate the use of the self-study as a tool for curriculum improvement. The school in which the project occurred is briefly described. A chronology of the content and structure of the workshops delivered during the project is presented. The results of a preliminary teachers' evaluation of the project are discussed. The paper closes with the identification of several characteristics that enhanced the use of the reaccreditation self-study process as a tool for curriculum improvement.

Many schools across the country have experienced the lengthy process necessary to accomplish school reaccreditation. As teacher educators we frequently hear school based educators complain about the extensive time necessary to complete the self-study reports, citing that there is little value to the process. This paper reports on a project that used the reaccreditation self-study process as a tool for curriculum improvement, thereby providing value to the process. The school in which the project occurred is briefly described, as is a chronology of the reaccreditation project. Some preliminary results of the teachers' evaluation of the project are discussed. Finally, several characteristics that enhanced the use of the reaccreditation self-study process as a tool for curriculum improvement are briefly identified.

School Description

St. Jerome Catholic School has been serving the Ft. Lauderdale area since 1961. Directed by the Sisters of St. Philip Neri, the school provides a joyful climate and a strong academic program. St. Jerome School educates approximately 325 children from three years old through eighth grade. These children come from predominantly blue collar homes. Their racial and ethnic heritage, like the community in which they live, is rich and diverse.

The curriculum of St. Jerome School is broad based. The basic academic program consists of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Special subjects encompass art, music, computer science, health, and physical education. A strong religious program includes instruction in religion as well as participation in sacraments

and liturgical celebrations. Extracurricular activities are numerous, ranging from intramural sports and to Student Council and Newspaper. Some of the most popular extracurricular subjects are gymnastics, dance, and Karate. Students who qualify for assistance through the Chapter I federal program participate in virtual learning experiences via interactive satellite classes. Tutoring and counseling are also services available at St. Jerome School. In addition, a full after school care program is provided.

This broad curriculum provides students with opportunities for their intellectual, spiritual, moral, emotional, social, and physical development. Students consistently achieve test scores above the national average. In addition, students have won many special awards in local and state competitions in mathematics, spelling, art, geography, and science.

Chronology of the Reaccreditation Project

St. Jerome School began it's self-study for Florida Catholic Conference reaccreditation in January 1995. Although the required year of self-study prior to the reaccreditation visit was not scheduled to begin until the fall of 1995, the principal was anxious to begin the process early. Her goal was to provide enough time for faculty, staff, and administration to explore school wide issues and dialogue about curriculum improvement. It is important to note here that part of how she accomplished this goal was to provide faculty and staff incentives, one of which was early release time for workshops.

The principal, Sr. Vivian Gomez, worked with a consultant to facilitate the accreditation/school improvement process. The consultant visited the school and talked with the principal in order to gain a broad understanding of the school's purpose--it's mission, philosophy, and goals. Then, based upon the school's purpose, the principal and the consultant collaboratively planned a series of workshops. These workshops included two series of sessions: one to develop the reaccreditation report, the other on teaching methodologies to address curriculum improvement. The topics in each series were intertwined in order to allow the faculty and staff to use their new knowledge to improve curriculum while completing the self-study.

The first workshop in January 1995 allowed faculty, staff, and administration to reflect on their mission and philosophy, recognize what had been successful, and then revise the mission and philosophy to enhance it. In June of 1995 the principal and consultant organized a meeting to begin the self-study team process. The Steering Committee was selected and met to clarify their agenda and establish a time line for completion of the self-study. The day after the Steering Committee met, the faculty, staff, and administration reconvened for another workshop. The self-study process was overviewed by the consultant and the Steering Committee. Then, the workshop participants reviewed the results of the previous workshop on the school's mission and philosophy, and

discussed the school goals. Existing goals were listed, new ideas explored, and a vision for the future was created.

In August 1995, with the beginning of the new academic year, faculty and staff volunteered for subcommittee assignments and the process of team exploration of the school's curriculum was begun. Subcommittees include: Philosophy and Objectives, Design and Learning, Learning Media, Staff and Administration, School Plant, Faculty Data, School and Community, Plans and Priorities, Academics, Extra Curricular, and Pupil Services. Because of the small size of the school, faculty and staff volunteered to participate in multiple subcommittees. These subcommittees continue to meet at this writing.

The August workshop for faculty, staff, and administration reviewed the self-study process; the revised mission, philosophy, and goals; and discussed the curriculum development cycle. This cycle--needs assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation--was also used as a process for completing the self-study. In addition, the workshop participants completed activities designed to explore their personal philosophy of schooling and its alignment of the school's mission, philosophy, and goals, thus enhancing the overall school curriculum.

The fall workshops focused on teaching methodologies for instructional improvement. The September workshop topic was cooperative learning. Faculty gained content knowledge on the theoretical foundations of cooperative learning (Murray, 1994), the

positive outcomes of cooperative learning for students (Child Development Project, 1988; Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984; Lemming, 1992; Slavin 1990, 1991), and the components necessary for structuring successful cooperative learning experiences (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). They practiced their new knowledge by participating in cooperative groups that solved common problems with classroom implementation. The workshop closed with teachers developing action plans for how they would implement cooperative learning in their classrooms.

In October the workshop participants worked in cooperative groups sharing their experiences, both successes and failures, in implementing cooperative learning. They had an opportunity to receive peer feedback and suggestions for improved instructional practice. The second component of the workshop provided content knowledge on various forms of alternative assessment (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992; Perrone, 1991) and practical applications for the classroom. The session ended with teachers developing an action plan for implementation of alternative assessment in their classrooms.

November's workshop allowed the teachers time in cooperative groups to discuss how they had used alternative assessment in the classroom. One of the issues raised in the previous session, how they could get ongoing support from colleagues while they were implementing the new teaching methodologies, was addressed.

Throughout the fall many of the subcommittees worked on the self-study. For example, the Philosophy and Objectives Subcommittee reviewed the work that the teachers had completed in previous workshops on philosophy, mission, and objectives and completed a detailed report of how these are implemented in the students' day to day experiences at St. Jerome.

With the start of the new year the entire faculty and staff's work has been focused on completing the self-study report. January's workshop session provided a forum for teachers to work in their subcommittees. Each subcommittee, using the curriculum development cycle, studied the curricula. They explored strengths, assessed needs, evaluated planning and implementation, and defined areas for improvement in various subjects within the curriculum. Also, during the session the subcommittees used the revised mission, philosophy, and goals to insure that the curriculum in each subject aligned with the purpose of the school. The principal, the consultant, and a knowledgeable school volunteer were available to answer faculty's questions and provide feedback on the reports. Interestingly, among the many curriculum strengths that teachers listed were the newly enhanced teaching skills in cooperative learning and the implementation of alternative assessment.

The February workshop followed a similar format to that of January. It continued the forum for teachers to work on the self-study report.

In March the workshop will focus on sharing teaching tips. Faculty and the consultant will describe techniques that worked for them and explain why they worked. Techniques will focus on: (a) the structure and organization of the classroom, and (b) on effective teaching methods for enhancing students' academic success.

Additional sessions in the workshop series may include using peace education to improve student discipline and exploring Montessori education methods. Time has also been allotted for the subcommittees to continue to meet, read drafts of the self-study reports, and receive feedback on their reports.

In essence, the workshops have provided faculty, staff, and administration with the opportunity to use the reaccreditation process as a tool for curriculum improvement. Intertwining the development of the reaccreditation report with a series of workshops on teaching methodologies facilitated completion of the self-study while improving school curriculum.

Preliminary Evaluation Results

The first phase of the evaluation of the project was conducted in January 1996. Teachers were asked to complete a survey designed to indicate their assessment of the series of workshops completed to that point. The response rate on the survey was 100%. The quantitative results are depicted in Table 1 and Table 2 with percentage rates reported for percantage of agrement on Likert scale items. However, for the purposes of discussion in this paper the

Likert scale responses for strongly agree and agree have been collapsed to one total percentage rating.

Teachers agreed that the series of workshops provided them with new knowledge (95%), reaffirmed their existing knowledge base (94%), and gave them opportunities to discuss the practice and application of their knowledge (94%). They also felt that as a result of participating in the workshops they were able to apply their new knowledge, particularly as it pertains to the school's mission (94%), the school's philosophy and goals (94%), cooperative learning (100%), and alternative assessment (82%). In general, teachers indicated that applying the knowledge from the workshop in their classrooms was professionally growth producing (94%). Aside from documenting teachers' growth, these results indicate that the teachers thoroughly explored the implementation phase of the curriculum development cycle by applying their new knowledge and revising their existing knowledge. By discussing their teaching practices, they also embarked on the curriculum evaluation process. Through the exploration of curricula implementation and evaluation, teachers gained some insights necessary for completing of the self-study process.

In the area of revising the application of existing knowledge, teachers responses were somewhat mixed in relation to the mission, philosophy, and goals. (Please see Table 1.) This may be due to two factors. First, responses may have varied for newer teachers whose existing knowledge was limited. Second, teachers may not be clear

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on how to revise what they currently do in these areas. The problem may be associated with the transfer of knowledge, a factor that has been acknowledged in the literature on staff development (Joyce & Showers, 1995). The principal and the consultant will follow up with teachers in order to remediable this problem. Interestingly, in the area of revising the application of new knowledge in the areas of cooperative learning (88%) and alternative assessment (82%), teachers were able to do this successfully. Perhaps in the case of these two workshops, the specific action plans that teachers were asked to design and the subsequent opportunities for feedback on the implementation of those plans promoted transference of knowledge. These techniques of providing opportunity for practice and feedback are identified in the literature on successful staff development (Joyce & Showers, 1988; Oja, 1991; Zide, LeBlanc, McAllister, & Verge,1987).

In general, teachers felt that through the workshops and other methods of collegial support they were able to share with colleagues their knowledge (88%), problems (82%), and new ideas (88%). Thus, teachers experienced a collegial environment in which they could grow as professionals. The teachers' responses on this item are particularly encouraging as the research on successful staff development cites the importance of a collegial environment to support educational innovations (Fullan, 1992).

It should be noted that the workshop on distance learning had mixed results on the survey. (Please see Table 1.) Since the program

is being used with Chapter I students, many teachers may have felt that the application opportunities for them were somewhat limited. Since the distance learning program is new, several transition issues have arisen. This training isssue is one example that is currently being addressed so that distance learning will become more relevant for all teachers and students.

The final area evaluated on the survey was the teachers' perceptions of the outcomes for students. Teachers felt that by applying the new knowledge and practices that they learned in the workshops, their students' learning is more interactive (88%). Also, teachers felt that their students' interest or enjoyment of learning increased (83%). However, direct links to students' academic achievement were limited (65%). This latter area will be explored by the principal and the consultant. Perhaps a study of academic achievement needs to be conducted to ascertain the true effects of teachers' increased professional growth. It should be noted, however, that the results of this teacher survey item have been evidenced in the literature on staff development. Difficulty documenting this connection has been long standing (Joyce & Showers, 1995).

Self-Study as a Tool

It is the contention of the project developers that a reaccreditation self-study can be used as a tool for curricula improvement. The preliminary project evaluation results support this contention. However, the reader may be curious as to what factors promote the

successful use of a reaccreditation self-study as a tool for curricula improvement. Three areas are briefly identified here.

In order to insure success the project developers used many of the procedures recommended in the research on effective staff development and sustaining innovation. The first procedure was a systemic view of the process. Specific questions were addressed related to the school's vision, core values, prioritizing, and identifying structures and resources (Wagner, 1993). The second procedure used was to incorporate effective staff development techniques into the workshops, i.e. using theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback (Joyce & Showers, 1995). Finally, culture that supports innovation was the basis of the project. Vision and common values emerged again, as well as a collaborative leadership style, sharing and collegiality, and teacher empowerment (Goldman & O'Shea, 1990; Simpson, 1990).

The specifics of how these particular procedures connect to the project described here is the content of another paper currently under development by the authors. Further information is available upon request.

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Table 1

St. Jerome School Teachers' Assessment of Faculty Inservice for January 1995 - January 1996 Quantitative Results for Items 1-5

Question	Percentage					
	SA	A	U	D	SD	NA
1. Each of the workshops that I attended						
A. provided me with new knowledge.	71%	24%	-	-	-	6%
B. reaffirmed my existing knowledge.	59%	35%	6%	-	-	-
C. gave me opportunities to discuss the practice/application of knowledge.	82%	12%	-	-	-	6%
2. As a result of participating in the workshops, I was able to apply new knowledge about						
A. the mission of St. Jerome.	41%	53%	-	-	-	6%
B. the philosophy & goals of St. Jerome.	53%	41%	-	-	-	6%
C. Cooperative Learning.	47%	53%	-	-	-	-
D. Alternative Assessment.	47%	35%	6%	-	-	12%
E. Distance Learning (Educational Management Group)	18%	12%	29%	-	-	41%

Note.
SA = Strongly Agree, A= Agree, U = Undecided, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree, and NA = Non Applicable. Response rates were rounded to the nearest tenth sometimes yielding a total of 101%.

Question	Percentage					
	SA	A	U	D	SD	NA
3. As a result of participating in the workshops, I was able to revise my application of existing knowledge about						
A. the mission of St. Jerome.	29%	35%	18%	-	-	18%
B. the philosophy & goals of St. Jerome.	24%	35%	23%	-	-	18%
C. Cooperative Learning.	47%	41%	12%	-	-	-
D. Alternative Assessment.	35%	47%	6%	-	-	12%
E. Distance Learning (Educational Management Group).	12%	18%	35%	-	-	35%
4. Through the workshops and other methods of collegial support, I have had an opportunity to share with colleagues						
A. knowledge/practices that worked for me.	41%	47%	6%	-	-	6%
B. problems with implementing knowledge/practices.	47%	35%	12%	-	-	6%
C. new ideas about practices that work.	47%	41%	6%	-	-	6%
5. I believe that the new knowledge/ practices that I have learned in the workshops and implemented in my classroom have impacted my students in the following ways						
A. made students' learning more interactive.	35%	53%	6%	-	-	6%
B. increased students' interest or enjoyment of learning.	18%	65%	6%	6%	-	6%
C. improved students' achievement.	18%	47%	23%	-	-	12%

Table 2

St. Jerome School Teachers' Assessment of Faculty Inservice for January 1995 - January 1996 Quantitative Results for Item 6

Question	Percentage
6. For me, applying knowledge from the workshop in my classroom was	
A. enjoyable.	41%
B. professionally growth producing.	94%
C. more work without significant positive results.	6%

Note.
Teachers could select multiple responses on this item.